

Cantina Communications

Mos Eisley is a frontier town and the seedy bar room was crowded with creatures from other planets -- traders, dealers, freelance space crew looking for a job, confidence tricksters and the outlaws from a dozen worlds. Somehow Ben Kenobi and Luke Skywalker had to find a pilot who would take them on their desperate mission. His old tutor plunged into the crowd and Luke was left on his own, wondering at the extraordinary variety of life-forms around him. What were they thinking? What strange skills did they possess? Above all, which of them could they trust?

The universe had already revealed some bizarre forms of life, and more were discovered every year. Travelers returning from the remote parts of the galaxy even spoke of giant clouds of gas, drifting in outer space, which had evolved intelligence of a sort based on internal force-fields. As a rule, the bigger and more complex the brain, the higher the intelligence, but most of the superbrains were too large to move around independently and kept very much to themselves. Luke had seen pictures of some of them, like the giant algae-beds in the Cygnus B system and, perhaps the strangest of all, the "thinking" ocean which covered the planet Solanus. This was a sea so rich in chemicals it could carry out billions of thought processes in its murky depths, yet it refused to take part in galactic affairs and spent its time playing with itself, making and reforming elaborate crystal structures and brooding on its own identity.

But that, as Han Solo would say, is another world. Here on Tatooine, Luke was faced with a familiar range of biology. However strange their outward appearance at least they walked and talked.

Although the bar was noisy, Luke realized that not all the conversation was audible. At higher frequencies than he could hear, there was an ultrasonic cacophony of squeaks and whistles. Klytonians were talking to each other across the room by vibrations in the electric fields generated from the leathery scales which covered their bodies. Telepaths bent their heads together in corners, trying to shut out the babble of brainwaves around them and olfaxes sniffed the air, conversing in what was probably the most sophisticated language of all -- the language of smell.

A human being has five million sensory cells responding to smell signals, and a dog -- which is one of the best earthly olfaxes -- has 150 million. But on some of the dark planets, a long way from the nearest star or covered with dense clouds, olfaxes have evolved which had half their brain devoted to smell.

Using three different types of nerves in the same way that humans have three different light receptors in their eyes, they could "smell" in color and 3-D. With their eyes closed they could tell you not only who was in the bar, but where they were standing. There was no way to hide from an olfax and Imperial stormtroopers seldom got the drop on them because their sensitive noses detected them long before they were visible. It was impossible to lie to them because their smell conveyed the true meaning behind your words. An olfax could smell anxiety or fear or trust and easily as a human can smell fresh baked bread.

Luke used to wonder how the olfaxes, with their poor eyesight, ever discovered the rest of the galaxy, until old Ben Kenobi pointed out that many forms of radiation produce smells. Ultra-violet light, for instance, turns oxygen into ozone and it was the distinctive aroma of this that gave the olfaxes their first clue to the universe.

"Mind you," the old man had added, "they are hopeless at space flight. Their chemical computers are slow compared to ours and you can't smell anything in a vacuum."

"Which species make the best pilots?" Luke had asked, and to his surprise Ben had taken down his battered copy of the *Universal Encyclopedia* and opened it at a picture of an insect-like creature with huge multiple eyes.

"These," he said. "I still need computers, but these can do the calculations in their heads. Look at their eyes with all those facets. Their brains have evolved to coordinate all those image automatically. They think mathematics. Trajectories and orbits come naturally to them and they are the best astral navigators I have ever come across. They have a flicker-fusion rate of over three hundred!"

"What does that mean?" asked Luke.

"It's the speed at which they can take in information. If you look at more than 20 pictures a second they run together like a film, but you could show these creatures 300 pictures a second and they would still see each one as a separate still image. That's how fast they are!"

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Luke remembered Ben Kenobi's words as he looked around the bar. What was that phrase the old warrior had used? "Never mind what they look like. It's how they think that matters." But what were they thinking, these bio-electrics, telepaths, olfaxes, and heat-sensitives whose world was a rainbow of different temperatures and ultrasonics who saw right through time? Not for the first time, he was glad that Kenobi -- and the Force -- was with him.

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